

Heather Elliott

*Interviewing mothers: reflections on closeness and reflexivity in research encounters*

**Introduction**

The ideas that a researcher is both integral to the social world she investigates and the medium through which others come to understand the research subject have long histories within critical social science (Frosh 2010; Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Hubbard *et al* 2001; Kleinman 1991; Hunt 1989). In Hunt's evocative phrase, the researcher is the 'instrument' of knowing. Data are produced through what she is able to hear, what she thinks to ask, what she avoids, pursues, remembers and forgets, and importantly, through what she feels. Given the significance of the researcher's subjectivity for understanding and evaluating research, there are relatively few accounts of working with reflexivity for data analysis within social sciences (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). What do we need to know about the researcher in order to evaluate the research and how can we know it? How, as researchers, do we notice ourselves in ways which make the interpretative self visible?

This paper addresses these questions. Using audio, field notes and interview data, as well as reflections on my own experience of undertaking research close to home, I consider how to understand what kind of data collection and interpretative instrument I am in the context of a study on first-time motherhood.

*Becoming Bangladeshi, African Caribbean and White mothers: identities in process*, was led by Professors Wendy Hollway and Ann Phoenix and was part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Identities and Social Action programme (Hollway and Phoenix 2008; Elliott *et al* 2009). The study was psychosocial (Hollway 2004) and aimed to understand how women experienced the process of becoming mothers for the first time. The fieldwork involved three interviews with eighteen Bangladeshi, White, African and African Caribbean mothers, who all gave birth in the same hospital in inner city London within a six-month period. Using a free associative narrative method (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), women were interviewed just before or immediately after the birth of their first babies, then again when the babies were around five months old and finally just after the babies' first birthdays. In addition, six of the mothers were observed weekly for one year, using a method based on the

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infant observations carried out as part of the psychotherapy training programme at the Tavistock Clinic (Urwin 2007).

Alongside interview material from the study, I use my own mothering and working experience as data. This approach draws on Lisa Baraitser's work which uses accounts of her own maternal experience to engage with maternal theory and practice (Baraitser 2009). I became a mother in the borough where the study was conducted a few years before the mothers I interviewed. I still live there. Like them, my mothering identity was forged in the area. This paper shows how the research process engaged my personal biography and my identities as a mother and as a worker, how they were played out in small shocks and coincidences when my work spilled into my life. For example, I run into one of my interviewees in my corner shop (also hers). A woman I interview mentions a consultation with the same doctor my partner sees. My son's nursery teacher says she can tell that I have reduced my working hours, as he is much happier.

The processes of data-gathering – reading versions of the maternal across different literatures and observing and talking to mothers – mirrors the methodology I use to work out how to be a mother. That is, talking to peers, watching how they do it and reading childcare manuals, novels, picture books, poems, newspaper articles, content on websites. This paper is also about my emotional engagement with representations of mothering at a particular cultural moment and how they shape the kind stories I can hear and the kind of writing I can produce. The period when the research took place was characterised by increased visibility for some versions of mothering, apparent in the growing influence of social networking sites such as Mumsnet and the proliferation of 'mumoirs' (Cusk 2001; Enright 2005) and popular fiction about motherhood (Pearson 2003; Williams 2006; Neill 2007), as well as sustained debate about how to combine motherhood and paid work. These were largely middle-class phenomena. The period was also one of increased demonisation of working class mothers (Tyler 2008).

*Becoming Bangladeshi, African Caribbean and White mothers* had a focus on embodied, unconscious and taken-for-granted data on the transition to motherhood. The research space was conceptualised as relational and dynamic, co-created between researcher and researched. This commitment to working with what was unavailable to discourse as well as with the articulated, and to paying attention to the dynamic flow of the research encounter required profound and complex reflexive work. This work does something different from what Frosh

has called the ‘honest gaze’ of the reflexive researcher which takes in ‘how the research is set up, what is communicated to the subject, what differences of race, class gender etc., might prevail and what impact they might have and how her or his actions might influence the subject’s own active meaning-making activities’ (Frosh 2010, p.211). There are various strategies suggested within critical social science and psychosocial studies to access emotionally sensed data and the unconscious investments of the researcher. These include paying particular attention to aspects of the encounter where communication appears to falter or shift - mistakes, changes of subject or silence; recording the immediate associations and impressions in reflexive fieldnotes and using a team of researchers in a group analytic process to identify what the researcher cannot notice herself (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Wengraf 2001; Walkerdine *et al* 2001; Frosh, 2010). I used all of these strategies in the analysis I present below.

There are, however, limitations to these methods. Self-analysis and even analysis by groups steeped in a common research culture may be limited in their capacity to generate sufficient critical distance from the researcher’s experience to fully identify what she brings to the research (Frosh 2010). Moreover, there are limits to what personal information can be safely and ethically shared in professional groups, which, however creative and ‘flat’, are defined by professional relations and the pragmatics of delivering a research project. Group work can be particularly exposing for contract researchers, who undertake the majority of fieldwork and who, as the most temporary, lowest status members of research teams, are the most vulnerable professionally (Goode 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Within the *Becoming Bangladeshi, African Caribbean and White mothers* project we tried to address some of these limitations by providing a space for me with a psychotherapist who was also an experienced researcher. This was a space separate from the main research team, where aspects of my experience could be thought about and explored for their meaning and relevance. This form of supervision also enabled the development of reflexive awareness and as well as containing the considerable emotional work of the reflexive use of self. We have presented this work in detail elsewhere (see Elliott *et al* 2011).

Building on work undertaken in supervision with within the research team, I have written some autobiographical notes to offer some insights into what place my story had in the research process. This writing is based on personal documents such as my application for the research project, a good luck card from my son, an advertisement for a nanny, my

research notes and fieldnotes from my interviews with mothers and from my own everyday life, as well as from academic and popular texts about the maternal. I have then brought this work to bear on a re-engagement with fieldnotes, audio data and interview transcripts from my research interviews, in particular the interviews with ‘Sarah’, whom I focus on in the last section of this paper.

Writing about using researchers’ subjectivities in fieldwork and for interpretation, Les Back quotes bel hooks’ distinction between ‘writing which enables us to hold to life even as we are clinging to old hurts and wounds and that writing which offers to us a space where we are able to confront reality in such a way that we live more fully’ (Back 2007, p.160). The process of writing about my own experience did both. It helped me to disentangle myself from a research project tightly bound up with my life and to process the emotional work involved in holding onto research subjects’ stories. The writing also opened up a space between my own story and those of the research subjects, enabling me to develop new insights into our data. In Back’s words again, it helped me to ‘hold accounts of social life in place without folding the person I was listening to back into myself.’ My autobiographical notes also offer others a context for the emotionally-sensed data I discuss here. Specifically, they are suggestive of the undertow of feeling which I brought to my fieldwork and of why aspects of Sarah’s story were difficult for me to hear.

I have struggled to find a way of writing which can fit within the conventions of academic writing and yet convey the tangledness of my life and work and avoid the impression that my experience can be ‘used’ in any straightforward way to understand my research subjects. I am aware that this autobiographical writing is open to criticism of self-indulgence and of drowning out the experience of the researched with my own story. A danger of this kind of reflexive work is that one avoids the complexities and anxieties of knowing another and ‘settles for knowing oneself’ (Thomson 2009). An over-emphasis on my own story risks imposing what I think I know on others’ stories. Yet so can an under-emphasis. What a researcher brings to fieldwork and data analysis affects what she can know, whether it is acknowledged or not. Failure to engage with these emotions and responses explicitly can lead to them being expressed in other ways, such as in how one writes about the research subjects (Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Back 2007).

## **‘Heather’**

*‘As a mother of two young children living in Tower Hamlets I have recent and ongoing personal experience...’*

Becoming a working mother starts with thinking my way backwards and forwards into work. When I see the job advertisement, I have not worked in research for fourteen months, my younger son’s life-time. I have had only part-time work since the birth of my first son, four and a half years previously. This project about becoming a mother is to define the next few years of my own ongoing experience of becoming a mother. Re-engaging with full-time work, I feel like the mothers I interview, in transition.

I follow the paper trail of all the work I have done before – my CV, research reports, articles. Some of it is truly surprising and I come to it like a stranger. I consult a friend and former colleague about whether to mention that I am a local mother. And if I do mention the children, where to put them – an enduring question. We decide my local knowledge might well be my unique selling point, particularly in light of my maternity-riddled CV and I mention it in the penultimate sentence of my application. But it is more than a strategy. I am curious about how other mothers do it. It is why I want to do the job and why I think I can do it. When I am shortlisted I ask for the proposal. I am pleased that I have thought to do this. I start thinking about how I would do the project. I am interested. I feel plausible.

*We feel very positive about working with you*

I drop my younger son off with a mother I know from my older son’s nursery, who is a nanny. The interview room is high up, with views into the city from two floor-to-ceiling windows. One interviewer sits opposite, the other to my left around a table which seats about twenty. I cannot look at them both at the same time, I am conscious of swivelling this way and that. I feel like I am talking underwater, or through cotton wool. I don’t seem to know when to stop talking and feel my answers tail off into nothing. I cannot remember much about what we say, except for my answer to the question about a working experience that did not go well and what I learned from it. I start talking about working with a manager who went on maternity leave at the start of a new project, which I and another senior colleague then reworked in the seven months she was away. She struggled to get back into it. I remember never knowing if she was there or not, with her part-timeness and her vagueness. When I dredge up this memory in the interview, I have no idea where it is going and finish with something about communication channels in research teams. Maybe I am warning them,

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don't pick the one faltering back from maternity leave. Maybe I am talking to my former colleague, through the years. I know what it feels like now, to come back bewildered and woolly and badly dressed.

Back on street level, I am convinced I have not got the job. Panic sets in. I think about how hard it will be to get work, whether it will be possible at all. I feel maudlin about the alternative. Lost, at the school gate, confidence seeping. Always available. I remember, in another life, shortlisting with two colleagues, all of us looking at the CV of a woman who had spent five years as a 'home-maker' in her words. 'Too damn long making a home,' snorts the first, a mother of one. The other, a father of three, doesn't disagree.

### *The places you'll go*

When I am clearing out my office before I leave, I find the card which Liam gave me when I started work. The illustration was from a Dr Seuss story we had read together. Inside it said 'oh the places you'll go'. I recognised it from several I had bought earlier – stocking up. I wonder now how he got it. Had he found it himself? Had he asked my partner to help him find one? Or had someone suggested he write it? That it is just from him, not from his dad and his brother too makes me think it was his idea. Inside he had written 'Heather' not Mum. I remember a friend talking about how unsettling it was when her daughter, then two, went through a phase of calling her by her name. Just like the nanny. The equivalence, the demotion hurt. I'm reminded of a section in *Maternal Encounters*, in which Lisa Baraitser also explores the feelings evoked when her son uses her name, as if he were making her strange, 'opening up a gap between myself and who he elects me to be' (Baraitser 2009, p.36). These two mothers puzzling it out prompts me to wonder now what Liam was doing when he used my name. I see him recognising that something is changing, working out something for himself, for us which I could not explain to him. That there is somewhere I will go from before he was born, where I will not be Mum but Heather.

Liam's four year old writing wobbles with the sustained effort of pencil holding and spelling out. Thinking about all this and about the places I went far away from him brings a lump to my throat. Literally, something being pushed down or pushed up. The places he tried to follow. He asked me what my job was. I told him I would be talking to mothers and that maybe I would write a book. He is amazed how long it will take me to do this. Three years. A lifetime. He makes himself an office. He starts making his own books.

The first few weeks of the job feel like play for me too. I love the clear-cut starting and finishing. Signing off and pressing send. Getting things done and getting things right. I love the little pockets of time I now have. The train journey, the walk to the tube. One morning, I pass a mother I know, pushing a pram in the opposite direction on her way to school. 'You're going the wrong way!' she calls. 'I'm off to work!' I answer, pleased.

Not long after I start work, there is an incident at the nursery. The headteacher asks to see me when I drop Liam off. I follow her into her office, feeling shaky. Playtime over. She tells me that the incident is minor and not to worry. She wanted to talk to me because she knows I have just gone back to work and she wanted to reassure me. It is not about me going back to work, that I have a right to work and they will look after my boy. Her kindness chokes me but I hold onto the tears until I get out. I have read nothing yet so it is not too hard to believe her.

### *Afternoons*

Shortly after everything has started to unravel and I am working four days a week instead of five, two friends come back with their children after school. They chat on the sofa. There is nowhere to go after school now it is too cold and dark for the park. This reminds me of what I am working to avoid. The going nowhere, the waiting around for things to be over – the afternoon in the park, the playgroup, the day. I remember some lines by Philip Larkin, which get it. He sees mothers in playgrounds

*'in the hollows of afternoons...something .. pushing them*

*To the side of their own lives'* (Larkin, 'Afternoons', 2010, p.44).

Now I too can see myself in the park, being and watching both.

### *Bonjour*

On my day off with Rory, I get glimpses of his life without me. Sometimes people I don't know say hello to him. We go to the café by the nursery and they treat him like a young prince. He has a regular order. The owner has taught him to say bonjour. At a playgroup I run into a mother who has two boys almost exactly the same age as my two. I always felt her a bit ahead of me with all of it, somehow, but now I have a job. She says she hasn't seen me



for a while and I tell her I have gone back to work. ‘Does he miss you?’ she asks lightly. Mommy Wars.

### *Winnicott in the library*

One summer I read about psychoanalysis and mothering in the library while my mother is at home looking after my children. I find it almost unbearable. I cannot exactly explain why or maybe I cannot let myself think about exactly why. I focus on the big, fat, obvious irony of my paid work being to sit in a library reading about how important it is for me to be with my children. Like so many others, I feel infuriated and persecuted by the concept of ‘good-enough’ mothering, the bare minimum, which requires an unfeasible amount, impossible to combine with paid work. When I find the critiques (Doane and Hodges 1993; Baraitser 2009) later I fall on them gratefully. But Winnicott’s writing is beautiful and it goes right inside me.

To get through this literature, I buy *I don’t know how she does it* by Allison Pearson (2003), billed as ‘the untold story of the professional working mum at the start of the 21st century’. Actually, it reads like a smarter version of the stories that all of us middle-class mothers tell each other all the time. Brittle anecdotes about the children, the tiredness, the creaky relationships. The corner-cutting and little humiliations at work. Asking each other is this right? Is it OK? I am part of this cohort of reflexive mothers and it is what I am doing now. This impulse to semi-fictionalise ourselves, to talk about ourselves at a step remove, hyper-really, is created and fed and mirrored through the explosion of imagining about mothers which is all around us. There are novels and newspaper columns and a new genre: ‘mumoirs.’ Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work* (2001) is BBC Radio 4’s Book of the Week, just after my first son is born. Mommy wars between middle-class ‘working’ and ‘stay at home’ mothers rage across the media and the bestseller lists. Roszika Parker describes an exponential rise in academic writing about the maternal in the decade between the publication of the first and second editions of her book, *Maternal Ambivalence* (1995, 2005). Lisa Baraitser suggests that turning themselves into anecdotes is what women coming to the motherhood at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do (Baraitser 2009). Helen Simpson notes a similar upsurge in fiction about mothers during the same period (Simpson 2008).

I dip into *I don’t know how she does it* at random and read the whole book like this, the way mothers’ stories get passed around, in snatches, out of sequence. I read it as a kind of antidote to Winnicott, to the effort of understanding, reading in a straight line, following



through arguments which make me uneasy. I bounce between the two texts. How to work. How to be good-enough. How trying to do both will drive you mad. Whether to think or whether to withdraw from thinking. Whether to laugh it off or whether to weep. My sense of myself as a mother is precarious. Five years in, I am starting again. I do not know how to do it. I do not know how to undo what I have done wrong.

When I start reading this psychoanalytical literature, which I make ‘Winnicott’ stand for, I have to think about my mothering and my working in a different way. If I let it in, it brings me up short against the awful, solitary, crushing responsibility for another person’s happiness. The inevitability of failure. I become aware of different ways in which my anecdotes about my children can be read. I am nervous now about how my stories sound, what they reveal about my mothering. The impact the reading has on my sense of myself as a mother, the pathological lens through which I view my personally momentous but rather ordinary experience seems like hypochondria now. I carry this sense of motherhood as sickness into the interviews. I often come away from the mothers I interview wondering if they are ‘alright’, if they are coping. In thinking about my experience of reading, I also spot how vulnerable my mothering was, how easily I started to doubt myself. I am on the look-out for a similar sensitivity in the mothers I interview. I find it. Sarah gives up reading childcare manuals because any discrepancy between her son and the model children fills her with unbearable anxiety. Sylvia is glad she did not know I had children until the final interview, as she would have felt uncomfortable about criticising *The Contented Little Baby Book* (Ford 1999) in case it was my ‘bible.’

To write this, I go back to my notes to try to think myself back there, to understand more about what exactly it was that got to me. There are pages and pages and I remember how I struggled to pin it all down. Four years on, some points resonate with me. There are more, undoubtedly, that I cannot reach. I have written ‘Lack of ego support impinges on a baby in a way in which he must react. Reacting interrupts being and annihilates.’. ‘The creation of a false self is when a mother repeatedly fails to meet an infant’s gesture and imposes herself so the infant complies; inability to meet infant’s needs. True self is masked.’ And among all the notes, one sentence singled out. ‘It is the innumerable failures followed by the care that mends that builds up into a communication of love’.

I become haunted by the idea of the porousness of the mother and baby. I think about the various times when I did not hold my children when I left them alone in difficult environments, when I was a difficult environment.

I talk to a friend who is a psychotherapist and she absolves me. Babies and children thrive in all sorts of circumstances. She knows my children and they are fine. A mother I know tells me that her father had died when she was pregnant. As a baby, her son had had to be rocked to sleep for ages. She wonders about her grief, her own tears and her son's tears. I use the therapist's words to comfort her and they work. She tells me about a time when she and her son were lying in bed together, when her son was two or three. Her son had noticed that she was sad or far away. He asked her to tell him about his grandfather.

### *Compassionate Co-naissance*

A couple of years later, I hear Griselda Pollock give a paper about Bracha Ettinger's work. What I take from it is that the losses associated with birth and the enigmas of living which a baby experiences are primal and cannot be soothed by a flesh and blood mother. Facing these losses, she argues, a child will feel insufficiently held. Projecting primal anxieties onto real, care-giving mothers – 'ready-made mother-monsters' in Ettinger's words – feeds 'the not enough fantasy which makes us all fail as mothers'. She describes maternal subjectivity as a process of co-naissance, of mother and child becoming together, mutual but different, recognising each other before knowing. The womb is a site of 'hospitality and compassion for the other in their otherness'. I roll my understanding of Pollock's and Ettinger's ideas into 'compassionate co-naissance' and of all the tens of thousands of words I have read this phrase stays with me. I am comforted by the idea of mutual care between mother and child - an ongoing becoming together. I wallow in the possibility of compassion. I think of my friend's son asking his mother what his grandfather had been like. I think of her remembering that he had done this.

### **'Sarah'**

I want to hold this writing in mind to understand what kind of an instrument of knowing I was and how it impacted on what I was able to hear and to ask when I interviewed other mothers. To do so, I want to consider the dynamic of my research relationship with one of

my interviewees 'Sarah' and one particular exchange with her. My intention here is not to present a substantive analysis of our data or to suggest that this one case in any way 'stands for' the whole sample. Rather, I am using this case to illustrate a methodological discussion about how a researcher's experience affects how she reads data.

There are several reasons for focussing on Sarah here rather than the other nine mothers I interviewed. Our final interview troubled me and I am interested in using these feelings as data (Hollway 2009). The trouble relates to the theme of paid work and motherhood which as I have drawn out above, caused me anxiety and was a characteristic of a common culture of motherhood within which I found myself placing Sarah and myself. At the end of their first year of motherhood, Sarah is the only woman in our sample who is in full-time work. I am most aware of comparing Sarah's experience with my own, of thinking about not just 'how other women do it' but how they do it differently from me. I see similarities in our biographies and become aware of a risk of falling back on what I assume I know about her, rather than listening.

I am alerted to this tendency by colleagues reading a fieldnote from my first interview. They home in on my emphasis on our 'closeness'. Indeed, it is the first thing I choose to write about our interview. 'Sarah lives very close to me – I arrived seconds before her, she came rushing across the road, carrying shopping, as I was ringing her door bell. Whole interview felt in synch'. Yet one senses a shift in tone when I refer to Sarah as 'this woman' when describing how she talks about repeatedly failing to organise a family get together. 'It was curious that this woman had not been able to organise a party in light of how thoroughly and self-consciously she was preparing for birth'.

Their drawing out of the identifications and distancing in my interpretation about Sarah prompt me to think about this theme in relation to other mothers too. I come to see the comparative way I relate consciously and unconsciously to Sarah as characteristic of a version of middle-class mothering which takes as its references points connections with other new mothers rather than, or more than, connections with nuclear or extended families or within longstanding friendship based networks. 'I fall into the information sharing she highlights and I recognise from early NCT (National Childbirth Trust) type mothering' (Fieldnotes).

Sarah describes what I gloss as 'early NCT type mothering' in detail in her interviews. She learns about motherhood from watching and talking to other mothers and reflecting on

her own experience as well as consulting books, websites and television programmes. The argument that women can learn from each others' experiences, which I develop to persuade women to join the study, makes sense to Sarah. Other new mothers, whom she meets at antenatal and breastfeeding support groups, form the cornerstone of Sarah's support network. When she returns to work, she makes time to see them during her already heavily scheduled weekend.

Thus the research project is part of Sarah's reciprocal network of information, just as she is part of the network of information which makes up the research project. Sarah's mothering and my working are 'in synch'. Listening to her is my work, she helps me do my job and be seen by others to do it well. In the early stages of a new project, using an unfamiliar methodology, I am prone to anxieties common to contract researchers establishing themselves in a new field. I write in my fieldnotes that 'she is my first interviewee and I am grateful for her for giving long, revelatory answers which seems to be what the method requires'.

By the third interview Sarah has started to find certain kinds of information sharing disturbing. She has stopped consulting baby books altogether because any discrepancy between the model babies she reads about and her own child is too upsetting. She makes a conscious effort to discard information she no longer needs or which troubles her – including transcripts from her previous two interviews, which dwelt on a stage of motherhood she had 'moved on' from. She asks for an electronic rather than a paper copy of the transcript for our final interview, so that she can delete it when she has read it. In my fieldnotes I reflect that 'during the interview I become aware that I will not be able to delete Sarah easily.'

The impulse to delete relates in part to the stage of the project we have now entered. At the end of the long, fascinating, intense period of fieldwork, trying hard to hold all the women in the study, I am now keen to get some distance.

I live where I work, particularly close to Sarah and therefore there are practical difficulties in letting go. 'This time the commonalities between us disturb me[...] Her Tower Hamlets is my Tower Hamlets.... A few days after the interview, I bump into Sarah – she asks me about my son's school – what I think of it, how soon she would need to put her baby's name down.'

The impulse to delete comes also from the trouble and anxiety the interview left me with. I note that:

I pick up on the anxiety in Sarah's account. I find myself fiddling with my necklace during the interview, I feel panicky when the recorder starts to beep. I have a copy of her second interview and my fieldnotes in my bag. On my way home I have a creeping horror that I have left this on her table though I know this could not have happened [...] I felt a responsibility and uneasiness. What we take from her account and what she wants to convey may be quite different.

On reflection, there is anxiety in Sarah's account but I bring anxiety with me too. The rather hysterical tone of this extract ('creeping horror') reflects how rattled I am by the interview. The anxiety I note here relates to our telling her story differently from the way she has intended to it to be heard. This is a common ethical problem but one which I feel more sharply in light of her vulnerability to versions of motherhood different from her own, which cause her to abandon the baby books, and which I can identify with from my own response to reading. And perhaps also because I am uneasy about the cosiness I have adopted to smooth the interview.

The worry I record on my fieldnote, about the malfunctioning recorder and about leaving behind confidential material, centres on how I work. I experience myself as less competent than Sarah, whose working and childcare arrangements are more orderly than mine. The ability to 'delete' experience or not is a contrast I am starting to draw between Sarah's approach to working and mothering and my own, which I want to explore in the extract below.

The anxiety I do not note in my fieldnotes relates to my mothering, specifically how I combine paid work and motherhood. I become aware of my way of relating to Sarah shifting from a strategy to enable the kind of interview the project needs to a more involved, to authentic wondering about how she does it and how I do.

At the time of our second interview, when her daughter was five months old Sarah was preparing to return to paid work. She had found a childminder and has already started settling her daughter with her. She has renegotiated her hours to cover five days work in four. I anticipate that 'she will take the transition to work in her stride' (Fieldnotes).

When I interview her for the third and final time, just after her daughter's first birthday, she has indeed settled back smoothly, working from home and making time for a daily run and a lunch break while keeping strict office hours. However, there had been a bleak period immediately after she returned from maternity leave. Her boss did not keep to the new

working arrangements they had negotiated and she was constantly disturbed by clients during her day off – ‘it was horrible’. He had made life difficult in other ways which she had successfully challenged. She describes self-consciously changing her approach to work. ‘I work nine to five, those are my hours and I have a lunch hour and I don’t give them any more time than that. Because it’s a case of they’re just not really appreciating you, you’re not getting paid for overtime, they don’t really appreciate what you do’.

Although aware that Sarah is smarting from the recent humiliations at work, I am still impressed and intimidated rather by her clarity. I open my fieldnote contrasting her boundaries with the blurriness of my own work and childcare. ‘Taking a work call in a playground on a non-working day I am ‘hunched on the ground, struggling to hear her and manage diary, mobile and pen. I am noting now how our positions were reversed [...] we found a time easily. She wanted to be interviewed in her lunch hour and she asked me if I still remembered where her office was. She works from home and was talking about her house.’

Returning to work, Sarah was initially grateful that there was so much to do that ‘it helped me not think about her (daughter) or worry too much’. In particular she worries about her daughter being injured or abducted. She dreads seeing her childminder’s number appear on her mobile telephone and is scrupulous about packing her bag with spare clothes and health record ‘so I don’t get that phone call from Joan.’

When I ask about how her daughter is at the childminder’s, Sarah dwells on how they can say goodbye openly and easily.

Sarah I think she’s cried once to date, after I’d left her

Heather Right

Sarah And that’s just one morning

Heather Right

Sarah But she’s never cried when I leave. And I wave goodbye, so that she knows I’m going. She doesn’t- she doesn’t () I’m not sneaking out without her knowing

She goes on to talk about how her daughter enjoys the other children, but I draw her back to the crying.

Heather Can you tell me about the time she did cry – did it stick in your memory at all?

Sarah Truthfully no. because (.) (faster) I thought she was crying, I didn’t hear her too well, Joan puts the pushchair in, in front of her door (faster) and as soon as she goes in I- I- I leave(slower) I don’t really tend to go in and look and wave and then (.).

Heather Yeah

Sarah I just literally, I say goodbye, and as she puts her in I walk off, so I don't make a big deal out of it. I heard her cry as I walked away, but I thought oh maybe – if you drop something, if she's holding a toy and she drops it, she cries, because she really wants everything there..... she cries when she drops things, and something like dropping a toy on the floor, or *she'll do it herself*, she'll drop it herself and then she'll cry after it to remind you, pick it up for me please...

Heather Right

Sarah To me and . I'm not going to worry about that, I mean that's just(.) I can't really (.) you know, if you're gonna (.).

Heather Yeah

Sarah Obviously she is just going through a stage of dropping things, just wanting to see what noise they make and things like that. So I don't – it didn't really affect me that much

When I listen back to this and discuss it with colleagues, I hear her telling me about a baby who knows that things which disappear come back. A dropped toy is retrieved, a mother who leaves, returns. I am reminded of her efforts to control her own worry that her baby might be taken, that the child she drops (off) with the childminder in the morning, might not be there to pick up in the evening. She describes how she knows the child is OK when she leaves because of the attention she pays her when she is there. She notices the stages her daughter goes through, she picks up dropped toys, she works out what particular cries mean. What I hear initially, and take in, in a more personal way, is that a working mother cannot let a crying child prey on her mind, she needs to delete and be grateful for there being so much work that it crowds out the space to fret. 'I'm not going to worry about that, I mean that's just (.) I can't really (.) you know, if you're gonna...'. Sarah leaves the phrase unfinished but in my mind I fill in something like 'get anything done, you can't worry'.

Sarah is a fluent and articulate interviewee, talking for long periods of time with little input from me. Yet there is uncharacteristic hesitancy in this extract. There is difficulty in articulating what she has just told me is smooth and 'easy' I- I- I leave(slower)' ; her three attempts to frame a sentence about 'not worrying' falter before she abandons it. 'I'm not going to worry about that, I mean that's just (.) I can't really (.) you know, if you're gonna (.)'.

The topic of not going back to her crying child and my not letting it go interrupt Sarah's flow. When planning the interview schedule with colleagues, I had resisted including the question that I find myself asking 'can you tell me about a time s/he cried when you left her.' Strictly speaking the question I am asking is rather different – as Sarah herself notes several times, she does not leave a crying baby: she heard her baby cry after she had left. The



question we formulated had felt manipulative, an invitation to invest in discourses about appropriate maternal responses to upset children – to turn back and comfort or go away guiltily. Sarah does neither and struggles to explain this to me ‘truthfully’. She then goes on to say something that jolts me out of listening and into a conversation.

Sarah Sounds like a hard mum, doesn’t it?

Heather (Laughs) No, not at all, not at all, no

Sarah It wasn’t really obvious that she’s crying because I actually left her

Heather Right, yeah, I can see exactly what you mean, that’s very interesting. And you mentioned your boss wasn’t particularly – you didn’t feel particularly that he was child friendly.

My laughter reflects my surprise and discomfort at being drawn out of role. I understand her question as a request for reassurance, which, in comradely ‘NCT-type mothering’ mode, I rush to offer (‘Is this OK? Is this right?’). I then shut down this line of questioning, offering more reassurance and floundering for a few moments, before regrouping around a common bogeyman, her child-unfriendly boss. Sarah’s question makes me wonder if the difficulty Sarah has in getting her words out relates to the kind of audience I personally was, rather than, or as well as, to the effort of speaking against the hegemony of the good (enough) mother, available always to contain her baby’s upset. I wonder if I have conveyed to her in my embodied response to her talk that I might have judged her a ‘hard mum’. I wonder if I do indeed think she is? Would the question about the crying child been difficult for her, if I had not been the person asking her? Does the question worry her, or just me?

I change the subject because I do not want to undermine her explanation and thus add to her anxiety. I certainly do not want to add to my own. Her answer touches my own feelings about leaving my children with childcarers, moments which ‘stick in my memory’ and which I write little notes to myself about.

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‘Something about today, the way he wanted to hold onto me but let himself be pulled away by Maria [...]How our time together gets dominated by Liam. Focus work: take time off with Rory.

I notice a small reluctance to let go of me (no tears) and it stays with me. I contain it by writing a note before I start work. Noticing my son’s hesitation, thinking how easily I might have missed it, prompts me to think about what I might not notice about him in the busyness of looking after his older brother and working. I have an urge to hang on to the experience,

not to delete. The writing ends in a curt memo to self – to set boundaries around work, to focus properly when I am there, notice my son when I am not. I feel that I never quite do this and in Sarah I hear a mother who does manage to leave her child and go to work, then leave her work and go to her child. Yet I am ambivalent about the order, compartmentalising and deleting I hear in and I project onto Sarah's story, onto 'this woman'. I tell myself that the turmoil, the being pulled this way and that are all part of motherlove and the price of going to work. I other a more boundaried approach because it is painful to think that there are different (better?) ways of doing it than the way I have fallen into. In the clamour of the debate which Sarah's interview starts with my own experience, I almost miss the nuances of what she lets go of and what she holds.

'I'm in the kitchen and I want to go and take her to Joan this morning and I'm holding her and she's pointing to the teat of the bottle. I didn't know what she was pointing to, I thought she was pointing to the washing up, 'cos I just did it and it was on the thing. And I- and I have the time to actually take her close to it and see what she's pointing to. And she actually picked up the teat of the bottle, she obviously recognised it 'cos that's what she usually drinks out of. And it was just her picking it up, separate, not part of the bottle. I need to have time for her to do that.'

And how she wants, like I do, to hold onto more. 'Maybe I'm thinking that when she can walk we'll be able not to use her pushchair and maybe (.) I'm looking forward to the time when she can walk really slowly, so that I *would have to* take things slowly'.

## Conclusions

The analysis above shows the researcher as a person, as well as an instrument, embodied and embedded in the field, in the dynamics of a research team, in a family and within a particular culture of mothering. I was fortunate to have colleagues who recognised that the work involved in undertaking this kind of analysis was a resource for the project and potentially draining and provided spaces for reflection and support (Elliott *et al* 2011).

I was fortunate and I was also unusual. Within UK research culture, contract researchers are generally treated more instrumentally (Collinson 2004). Goode (2006) describes the challenges involved in maintaining a coherent professional identity in the face of institutional and substantive discontinuities between projects. Disentangling oneself from one project before moving onto the next is complicated by a 'residue' of under-analysed material which can attach to researchers. They become repositories for data to 'hold and carry away to the next project, or else reflect on in something of a vacuum' (Goode 2006; 5.1). The

undervaluing of emotional data involves professional losses and missed opportunities for reflexive data analysis and writing as well as personal costs.

The example I discuss is of a topic shut down, something missing. This points to the value of looking at the details and slips in research encounters, the ‘margins of the main story’ (Baraitser 2009, p.14), where much mothering and ethnography takes place. It also suggests how fleeting and tentative insights into one’s own investments can be - and how usefully unsettling. When I make the comparisons I am drawing between Sarah and myself explicit, I am able to draw back from caricaturing Sarah as competent, successful and hard. I trouble the story I was settling for and leave my interpretations of her and the rest of my sample more open.

## Epilogue

When I am writing this piece, I meet Sarah again, with her newborn baby. There on the street, with my children dancing around me, we fall straight back into interview mode. She tells me it is easier now, her first child is happily settled in nursery and she has time to spend with the baby and with other mothers. She will go back to work in a while but her childminder is leaving the area. She doesn’t know where she will find someone else local with two places. I stop myself trying to think of someone.

*Emphases and insertions are from the original transcription.*

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<sup>1</sup> Within the UK 96% of research staff are employed on hourly or fixed term contracts, while annual turnover of staff was between 35 and 50 %. (Bryson and Barnes, cited in Collinson, 2004).